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TAGS: PGOV PREL SA

SUBJECT: SAUDI ARABIA: WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN KING FAHD DIES

REF: RIYADH 3517

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador James Oberwetter. Reason: 1.4 (b,d).

1.(S) Mission has reported previously on King Fahd's condition. We have no new information of significance to report at this time other than recent pronouncements that his condition has "stabilized." However, we believe it would be prudent to begin to consider what will occur following his death. As a first step, Embassy therefore presents the following scenario for a funeral and succession.

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Succession  
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¶2. (C) The announcement of the King's death and the designation of the new King and Crown Prince will probably be simultaneous. Prince Khalid bin Sultan describes in his memoires how the inner Al Saud family council formally pledge their allegiance (bayah) to the two new leaders in the minutes/hours following the monarch's passing.

¶3. (C) For the first time, under the 1992 Basic Law, the King -- and not the family -- selects the Crown Prince. Nevertheless, the King's choice for Crown Prince must receive the approval of the family. In practice, it is doubtful that there will be a change in the top leadership. That is, Crown Prince Abdullah will likely ascend the throne and Prince Sultan will become Crown Prince.

¶4. (C) The question mark is whether a new Second Deputy Prime Minister will be announced immediately, as was the case after King Khalid's death in 1982, when Prince Sultan was immediately designated Second Deputy Prime Minister. If so, it would be proof that the succession question had previously been resolved by the senior Al Saud. However, naming the Second Deputy Prime Minister is not required.

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Funeral  
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¶5. (C) The actual burial will take place within 24 hours, most likely in Riyadh. There is a remote possibility, depending on time of day of death, that the late King's remains would be transported to Jeddah for burial in Mecca. This would still have to meet the 24-hour burial requirement and also represent a break with tradition. The late King Khalid's burial was a chaotic affair: throngs of people lined the streets around the Grand Mosque and Al-Oud cemetery in Riyadh. However, we should not anticipate many public signs of grief. Conservative Saudis believe in submission to God's will in all things, including death.

¶6. (C) Arab (Muslim) leaders who are able to arrive in Riyadh in time, or are fortuitously already present, will attend the funeral. Non-Muslims may not. However, Muslim funerals, especially in conservative Saudi Arabia, dispense with the ceremony often seen in the West and elsewhere. Thereafter, foreign non-Muslim delegations will arrive to offer their

condolences and pay their respects to the new leadership. Unlike Western societies, or more Westernized Arab countries, there is no set protocol or ritual to govern the handling of these foreign delegations. Saudi Arabia's Bedouin traditions will prevail, and there will be a tremendous rush of Saudi notables who will compete for access to the new leadership.

¶7. (C) In 1982, Vice President Bush, Secretary of Defense Weinberger, Senator Charles Percy of Illinois, Senator J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana, Representative William Broomfield of Michigan, Representative Clement Zablocki of Wisconsin, General Lew Allen Jr., Air Force Chief of Staff, Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Robert McFarlane, and Joseph Twinam, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs comprised the official U.S. delegation. They arrived within 48 hours of the announcement of the King's death.

¶8. (C) Following the funeral, the new King will almost certainly address the nation on television. The government will likely call for a brief period of official mourning, probably three days. During that time, the King and many of the surviving sons of King Abd al-Aziz will receive pledges of loyalty from other royal family members, the armed forces, the ulama (religious leaders), tribal leaders, and ordinary citizens - a process involving literally thousands of people. Provincial governors will swear loyalty oaths on behalf of the King. When not receiving oaths, the King and new Crown Prince will meet with visiting dignitaries. Government offices and most commercial enterprises will close for three days.

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